

## Least Bell's Vireo (*Vireo bellii pusillus*)

Status - Federal: Endangered - State: Endangered

Photo: Moose Peterson/WRP



The Least Bell's vireo is a small songbird inhabiting riparian vegetation along meandering rivers of southern California. It has a plain, ash gray head and pale sulfur yellow-tinted sides. The body is olive gray above and whitish underneath; each wing bears 2 dull white bars. Its beak is short and slightly hooked at the tip, to pluck insects from the surfaces of leaves or branches.

A fully grown adult of this

bird species measures 12 cm (4.75 inches) in length.

The least Bell's vireo is one of four subspecies of Bell's vireo that are physically and behaviorally similar but do not overlap in their nesting or wintering range.

The birds feed almost entirely on insects. They pluck their prey from deciduous trees and shrubs -sometimes while hovering- or pick it out of the air.

**Habitat:** for breeding, they require fairly dense riparian shrubbery, preferably where flowing water is present, but they also favor dry watercourses in the desert, bordered by mesquite and Arrow-weed. Willow, wild rose, and other dense vegetation are used for nesting. The birds typically situate their cuplike nests of bark, fine grasses, and horse hair about 1 m (3.3 feet) above the ground.



California Department of Pesticide Regulation  
Endangered Species Project  
California Department of Fish & Game

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**Range:** the least Bell's vireo was historically common in the San Joaquin, Sacramento, Santa Clara, and Owens valleys, where as much as 80% of the population nested. other locations included the Salinas River Valley, and along the Amargosa River. The breeding population of this vireo north of the U.S. - Mexican border now numbers only about 400 breeding pairs. It breeds only in a few scattered areas of riparian habitat in southern California, primarily along the coast

and the western edge of the Mojave Desert. The Santa Margarita River in San Diego County supports nearly half of the U.S. population. Other sites are located in Inyo, Santa Barbara, Ventura, Riverside, Orange, San Bernardino, and San Diego counties.

**Breeding:** from their wintering grounds in southern Baja California, Mexico, least Bell's vireos migrate between mid-March and early April to their breeding grounds in southern California, where they remain until July or August. Females lay 3-5 white eggs, with scattered brown spots and incubate them for about 2 weeks. The nestlings fledge 10-12 days after they hatch but remain in the territory and receive parental care for a month or more. In optimal years, vireo pairs will attempt to rear a second brood, and some even up to four broods in a season if initial attempts fail.

**Endangerment:** Land development, water diversion, recreational activities, and excessive grazing continue to impact the remaining riparian systems that support least Bell's vireos. As a result, the birds are forced into marginal nesting areas, where they are more vulnerable to parasitism by the brown-headed cowbird, a brood parasite. Vireo reproductive success improved in areas where cowbirds have been trapped and removed (CDFG and USFWS).